

## Home of the Brave by HashtagLEH

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**Summary:**

“You know, this is not how I thought I was going to die.”

Billy snorted. “What, evil Russian spies under the mall never crossed your mind? Lack of imagination there, Stevie.”

## Home of the Brave

### Author's Note:

Apologies for the long wait! Life only gets busier... Also, apologies to all the commenters that I haven't responded to - I promise I will get to those, you are not forgotten! It was either respond to those or update though, and I figured considering it's been about six weeks I owed it to you guys to update instead. :/ So hopefully I can find the time in the next couple of days to let all of you lovely people know how great you are individually! Thank you for all of your continued support!

Susan married Joseph as an eighteen-year-old right out of high school. He was older, at twenty-one, but they had lived in the same apartment building since she was eight and her mom moved them from Sacramento, so Susan didn't think of him as being older – he was her friend.

She had loved him, and he loved her, though maybe not as much as he should have. But Susan had seen how difficult it was for her mom, struggling to keep a roof over their head and food on the table because she'd never had Susan's father to help out when she'd gotten pregnant with her in high school. Susan wanted the security of a husband in her life, and didn't know to look for the *right* kind of husband as a teenager. She just felt accomplished that she didn't have Max until she was married, although at eighteen years old that didn't mean much, in retrospect.

Joseph had been the one to introduce her to weed, when she was eleven and he was fourteen. Looking back, she supposed that she shouldn't have been too surprised at the fact that he soon turned to harder drugs, becoming an addict who disappeared at all hours despite the newborn back home. But she had been young and dumb, and Joseph provided some measure of security where she was lacking elsewhere. She had stayed with him for six more years before she finally had enough when he went to the hospital for yet another drug overdose. He hadn't even tried to argue, just signed the divorce

papers and let her take Max when she moved out.

She had the good fortune to find an apartment for cheap, and a job as a secretary at a small law firm soon afterwards. The hours were good, and she made friends with a neighbor who agreed to watch Max after school for a small fee while she was at work, so Susan had hope that her life was getting back into good order.

But then her neighbor had moved away, and she needed to find a daycare for Max, which was more expensive than her neighbor had been, and so she needed to find a second job, which meant that she stayed at the daycare longer than anyway. Susan had powered through though, not wanting for her daughter to experience the same hardships that she herself had growing up with a single mother, and had found a part-time job as a bagger at the grocery store.

But she was never really able to get on her feet financially – every month she was living paycheck to paycheck, and was unable to store any away for emergencies. And when the emergency came in the form of the transmission in her car going out in the same month that Max's arm broke when someone shoved her off the monkey bars – she just crumbled.

Living without the car wasn't so bad – she was fine walking to and from work, despite the distance. But it meant that she was exhausted all the time, and was hardly ever home for Max anyway. She wanted the best for her daughter, but on her own she just couldn't manage it. She longed for the security of a husband, of a second income that would allow Max to get some real food and not so much damn spaghetti as her main source of nutrients. With bills piling up, she felt like she was drowning, and dragging her young daughter down with her.

Meeting Neil had seemed an answer to her prayers. She met him at the grocery store when he came to get a pack of beers one night, which she might have been more leery about were it not for the fact that he smelled clean – not like smoke, or drugs, or the sweat of withdrawals. He had flirted with her, had been so charming despite the fact that she knew she looked far from her best with flyaways escaping her bun and deep circles under her eyes that betrayed her fatigue. She had brought up casually the fact that she had a young

daughter, and he wasn't fazed at all, allowing hope to flutter in her heart.

He had asked her out right then, and they had gone to dinner a couple of nights later. He'd been so sweet and attentive, concerned as she shared her worries with him. She even found out he had a son just a couple of years older than Max, so he wasn't just ignoring that she was a single mother as long as he could – he was just as invested in her as she was in him.

It felt nice to be wanted, and she hadn't really thought about how he didn't lean on her nearly so much as she did him. She was a disaster, after all – it wouldn't be strange that she needed more help than he did, that the relationship would be so tilted.

The romance had been quick but wonderful; Neil had even sent her flowers at the law firm once, and she had glowed at the attention, feeling like things were finally turning around. Max was a little distant with him, but she figured (hoped) that she would grow to like him eventually. Neil had proposed after just a few months of dating, and she had immediately accepted. A couple of days later she finally met his son Billy, who seemed sullen and quiet, but when he seemed to get along with Max just fine she chalked it up to pre-teen hormones mixed with not wanting a stepmother. She didn't begrudge him that, figured that they had time to bond.

After they had gotten engaged, she was able to quit her job at the grocery store. She continued to work at the law firm, because Neil made enough that he could support all of them but not enough to pack away any emergency funds, and she was anxious at the thought of being caught in those kinds of struggles again. The apartment that they moved into was bigger and didn't have mold in it, and the water always came out clean and hot, and Max was able to eat meat with every dinner now, so she counted it as a win and finally felt like she could *breathe* for the first time in years.

She had seen Neil's true colors about a month after the wedding. Billy had had a difficult day at school, which was normal for a teenager, and she didn't take the snarky comments personally as they sat down for dinner. Neil kept sending his son these *looks*, which she didn't think anything of either, because it was normal for a father to warn

his son with a scolding expression. She stayed out of it, because technically she was Billy's stepmother but they hadn't built any kind of rapport yet that she thought her saying something would do any good.

But then Billy made one comment too many, and Neil had grabbed Billy by the arm – tightly enough that it was definitely going to bruise – and despite the fact that Neil only hissed a reprimand for his behavior and a demand that he apologize to the suddenly stiff teenager, Susan's mind flashed back to the first time she had met the blond boy. She remembered the split bottom lip that had gone unexplained, and she had seen this kind of thing with neighbors before, as a child when no one cared what she might see because she was too young to be believed, and suddenly her meatloaf sat like a stone in her stomach.

Billy had looked at Susan for a long moment when Neil was hissing warnings at him, something like a dare – or maybe a plea – in his eyes. Susan had torn her gaze away to look at Max, who was obliviously eating her peas, and when she looked back at Billy, he was staring back down at his plate, resignation on his face as he muttered an apology for his comments.

Susan had automatically accepted the apology, and they had gone back to quietly eating their dinner. She felt like she had failed Billy, but she had to think about Max, so she shoved at the guilt sitting in her that she hadn't protested Neil's treatment of his son.

In the following years, she tried to keep that distinction in her mind. Billy was *Neil's* son, not hers. Because she couldn't just stand by if someone was hurting *her* child, but for Max's sake she would force herself to. She kept Max out of Neil's line of fire, kept her from seeing the worst of what happened to Billy, and reminded herself all the while of how bad it had been *before* Neil, how she couldn't go back to that again. And Billy grew to be strong, so he could take the hits, surely. She tried to protect him as best as she could, kept his secrets, very carefully didn't say anything when she heard a boy sneaking out his bedroom window when Neil came home early from work.

When Neil found out about that boy, Susan wasn't there. But she saw the aftermath, as Billy sat in the hospital bed, with the story that he'd

been jumped on his way home from the beach. She didn't believe it, could see the tells that meant Billy was lying, but when she heard Max talking with him when she thought no one else was listening, when she heard those hateful words spilling from Billy's lips about what a fag he was, things had clicked together in her mind. She had wanted to kill Neil right then and there. She wished that there was some way to take Billy and Max, get far away from there and from Neil – but Billy was only sixteen, and it would be considered a kidnapping, and she couldn't risk being caught. She couldn't risk Max being alone like that.

They had moved to Indiana shortly thereafter, and Susan still wasn't sure whether it was to get away from the specific boy that Billy had been caught with, or if it was because the Midwest was a lot less lenient about dealing with homosexuals and Neil could keep an eye on him more easily. She supposed it didn't matter.

The thing was, Neil never once hit Max. He never even grabbed her or yelled at her. And Susan could justify it to herself, staying for hers and Max's sake, because Neil brought in money, brought in security that meant they didn't have to struggle in the slums of LA. She constantly checked in with Max, making sure that Neil hadn't done anything when Susan wasn't there, but she eased off when Max seemed to be happy and content with the friends that she had made in Hawkins. Max wasn't sullen like Billy, so she knew that she was still safe in the bubble that Susan had worked hard to create for her.

She could tell when Billy found a boy like him here in Hawkins. She could tell when Max kept the boy a secret, when Billy started disappearing and looked happier when Neil wasn't there. She kept quiet about it then too, and didn't even try to figure out who the other boy was. Plausible deniability, and all that. She knew that Max had found someone to make her smile too, and it didn't seem fake so she left her to it, not even mentioning it to Neil because he got weird about some topics sometimes and she didn't want to find out if Max dating someone would be one of them.

She watched Billy and Max, as they grew closer over their time in Hawkins. She ached at the pain that she allowed to be brought to him to keep Max safe, but it seemed that Billy was doing the same thing, putting himself in Neil's path to draw attention away any time Max

did or said something to make Neil's jaw twitch. She consoled herself that at least she and Billy were on the same page there, and allowed the two of them to do as they pleased without her interference, blaming the distance that fell between them on the fact that they were teenagers and that they were growing up.

But one day in the middle of June, Susan came home from a later shift at work to see Billy's Camaro gone, which wasn't all that strange, but Max was gone too and that *was*. Usually Max asked Susan before going to her friend Jane's house for a sleepover – probably because she was more likely to say yes than Neil was. But when she asked Neil where her daughter was, he had just grunted out that she was at a friend's right then. She had subsided and gone to bed, not giving a second thought to the brace around Neil's wrist.

She grew more concerned and more suspicious as the week went on and neither Max nor Billy returned home. She asked Neil repeatedly where they were, and he kept telling her that they were with this friend or at that hangout, and she couldn't really do anything but her heart was sinking with worry for her kids girl.

They did end up returning home, which Susan only knew because she saw Billy's Camaro parked on the street again. She was working evenings that week, so except for peeking in on them sleeping when she got home she didn't see them until the Friday before Independence Day. She had to repeatedly push away the thought that the two of them were avoiding her, because why would they be upset with her now? Sure, Max had been more distant since they'd moved to Hawkins, but Susan had supposed that that was just her becoming a teenager, being moody.

The Friday when she was able to see them for the first time in almost two weeks, it was her day off. That was the only reason she saw them on their way out the door, as she ate her oatmeal at the kitchen table. Neil wasn't there, already gone to work, and when Susan saw Max's face she felt a sudden well of suspicion in her gut at what was going on.

Max frequently had bumps and bruises from skateboarding. But those wounds were usually on her elbows and her knees, her arms and legs. Last time she'd had a bruise on her face was a black eye she'd gotten

from Shirley Malone back in fourth grade. Now she had one from her cheekbone down to her jaw, yellowed with healing and looking over a week old. The fact that Susan hadn't seen her in so long suddenly seemed all the more suspicious.

They were already out the door before she gathered herself enough to think to question either of them about what had happened, and Susan thought to herself that she would make a point to ask Max when she got home that evening.

But Max was at Jane's for the weekend, and come Monday Susan had grown past the point of upset and went right into fury. Because she'd had the weekend to think about it, to stew in her guilt of being an absent and terrible mother, and Neil was going about like things were normal, dismissing Susan's concerns about the kids being gone so much.

It came to a head after a quiet dinner with just the two of them. As she went to the sink to wash the dishes, she asked Neil if he would take the trash to the curb for pickup the next day – a not unusual request, really.

But Neil just said carelessly, "Billy can do it when he gets back," and turned to go to the TV again.

Susan's hand clenched around the glass she held.

"When is he coming back, Neil?" Susan asked, looking down at the water spilling over the newly cracked glass in her hand. She dropped it in the sink and turned around to glare at her husband, the water still running behind her. "When are *either* of them coming back? Where *are* they?"

Neil looked scornful and dismissive. "They've been spending the weekend with friends – I'm sure they'll be back tonight."

"*Are* you sure?" Susan pressed, lips tight and brow furrowed. "Where have they *been* the past two weeks? You know I've only seen my daughter for a few *seconds* in that time?"

"I think that says more about you than it does about me, Suzie," Neil

said, voice almost mocking in its warning. “It’s summer – they’re always going in and out. Stop blaming me for not caring enough to keep up with your kid.”

That – stung. It almost made Susan back down, as she was reminded of her own shortcomings and failures regarding not only Max but Billy too. But then as Neil picked up the corded remote and sat down in his recliner, she felt a new rush of fury for the man, overpowering her own guilt for the moment.

“If you’ve seen them so much, where did Max get that bruise on her face?” Susan demanded before Neil could click the TV on.

“She skateboards everywhere, honey,” Neil said condescendingly, the endearment dripping with vinegar and scorn. “I’m sure she fell off, or something. What does it matter?”

Susan stepped away from the sink and closer to her husband, expression tight. “Where is Max tonight, Neil?”

“I told you, she’s at her friend’s house,” Neil snapped. “Now, stop being a sanctimonious *bitch* and go clean up from dinner.”

“No, you tell me what is going on,” Susan said, shaking in equal parts anger and fear because of the man in front of her. “You tell me why my kids are avoiding this house, and where the hell they’ve been...!”

“She’s probably been off fucking the negro!” Neil shouted furiously, getting to his feet. He got in close to her face, threatening with every inch he had on her, flecks of spit flying out with each word. “Which I blamed *Billy’s* faggot ways for, but now I wonder if it’s *your* fault she turned into such a fuck-up!”

Susan’s hand flew out without conscious thought, slapping Neil with the sound of a harsh *smack* echoing in the room. Before she had even processed what she had done, Neil’s hand shot out, fingers pressing tightly into her jaw, keeping her in place while his other hand grabbed the one she’d hit him with.

“Do not *test* me,” Neil hissed an inch from her face. “You don’t have my fool son to stop me from bruising that pretty face up like I did

your whore daughter.” In a sudden movement, he released her, shoving her to the ground.

Susan fell into the side of the chair at the kitchen table, bringing it down with her with a loud crash and clatter and earning several bruises. She felt warmth where her elbow scraped against the ground, and her heart pounded as she saw Neil advance on her again. She felt something almost like resignation, that Neil was finally going to beat *her* when Billy wasn’t available. She felt like she deserved it.

But the look on Neil’s face was terrifying, and deserving or not, she couldn’t *not* fight against the larger man, and she went scuttling back on all fours to get away from him as he advanced. Her hand reached to the counter, scrambling for the bread knife from dinner, and she grabbed it and swung out just in time for Neil to jump away from it to avoid being stabbed, expression shocked.

“You crazy *bitch*!” Neil snarled, face reddening with his outrage.

“*Get out*,” Susan demanded, shoving herself to her feet and keeping the serrated knife outstretched toward her husband. Her heart pounded as she stared at him, eyes wide as she kept her panic at bay. She wasn’t like this. She didn’t *do* this. “*Get out* of this house!”

“You think you can do *anything* without me?” Neil sneered. “After the pathetic state I *met* you in? Put the *fucking* knife down and go back to what you were doing.”

“You hit my daughter,” Susan said, voice shaking but grip on the knife sure. “You’ve hurt my son for long enough. *Get out*.”

“The hell he’s your son,” Neil scoffed derisively. “You didn’t *want* him – you wanted my money...”

Susan pulled the knife back, not to drop it but to wield it in preparation to slash at him again. “*Get out*!”

Neil eyed the knife, and then her, and finally sneered one last time before turning and grabbing his keys from the hook beside the door. He didn’t say a word, slamming the front door behind him so hard that it shook the house. A few moments later, Susan heard the engine

of his pickup truck turn over with that familiar rattle, before the roar of it disappeared down the street.

It was only when the sound disappeared that Susan finally shakily dropped the knife to her side. She stared at the small pool of blood on the ground that had dripped from her elbow, and wondered vaguely how much Billy had bled in his house over the years.

Biting her lip, she set the knife back on the counter and grabbed the wash cloth from the sink to start cleaning up the mess. She had always tried to keep a distance between herself and Billy, for her own sake as she was unable to deal with the guilt of standing by if she allowed herself to care for him the way a mother should for their son. Now it just seemed even more ridiculous, with the knowledge that Billy had been keeping Max away, had been protecting her from Neil much better than Susan ever had. She hadn't even known what had happened for two weeks, while Billy had apparently been there when it happened and had kept Neil from hurting Max more than he had.

Her heart squeezed with guilt as she thought of the two of them. Dear God, they were just *kids*. They shouldn't have to worry about their home being unsafe – they should be having fun and finding love and doing normal teenage things. Maybe they would've been able to if Susan had been a better mother. Maybe they would've trusted her with this if she had ever shown at all that she cared what Neil did to Billy.

Neil didn't come back that night, thankfully, but neither did the kids. As Susan sat in the house empty of her family, she vowed to herself to be a better mother – not just to Max, but to Billy too. She didn't know how she was going to keep it all afloat without Neil, but worrying about food wasn't as bad as worrying about harm coming to her family. She knew that now.

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“You know, this is not how I thought I was going to die.”

Billy snorted. “What, evil Russian spies under the mall never crossed your mind? Lack of imagination there, Stevie.”

Steve stared up at the ceiling above them. He would've liked to look at Billy instead, because Billy was nice to look at even when he was beat up, but he was tied back to back with him and couldn't turn his head that far.

"How's your head?" Steve asked instead of saying any of those thoughts.

Billy shrugged slightly against him. "Sore. I've had worse."

Steve blew out a large breath. "You know, that doesn't *actually* make me feel better. You...you were unconscious for a long time."

His last words came out in a whisper, as he fought not to choke on the memory of the fear when they had been shoved into the room together once again, and Billy had been beaten, bloody, and unconscious. He had feared for a terrible moment that he was dead, had only started breathing again himself when he touched him and felt his chest rising and falling with breath.

Billy was quiet for a long moment, but he leaned further into Steve as much as he could, providing wordless comfort. Steve breathed with him, wishing as much as he was hoping that they would be able to make it out of there.

"How are your burns?" Billy finally asked him. Steve winced at the reminder, shifting a little in the seat. The belt binding the two of them together rubbed against old bandages on his arms – they needed to be changed, but since they'd gotten trapped in the elevator however long ago that wasn't possible. The burn cream underneath was gone by now, so that Steve was pretty sure the bindings alone would feel better than the bindings *and* the bandages protecting the marks from the hot chains on Monday.

"I'll be fine," he said though, because they had more pressing worries. "Look, there's a pair of scissors on that table over there – I think if we work together we can get over there and cut ourselves free."

"There's that problem-solving brain I love," Billy declared, and Steve could hear the smile in his voice. "Alright, on three, okay?"

Moments later, Steve groaned and let his head drop to the ground tiredly. “We’re gonna fucking die.”

“We are *not* going to die, Steve,” Billy said, shoving one shoulder back to jostle his boyfriend. “Robin got Dustin and Erica out, so I’m sure they’ll be getting help from the others by now.”

“What the hell are they going to do against invading Russians?” Steve bemoaned.

“Well, we’ve won against interdimensional monsters and a parallel universe of shadows, so these guys are small fry by comparison, really,” Billy reasoned.

Steve snorted. “I’m impressed with their place of work, really,” he joked. “Love the vibe.”

“Right?” Billy laughed a little, relieved that Steve wasn’t slipping into that doom and gloom place he got to sometimes. “They didn’t even spring for some carpet. At least some paintings on the walls would bring the room together.”

“Dogs playing poker could go above that table,” Steve suggested, eyes wandering around the room.

“Maybe a nice arm chair in that corner...”

“With a floor lamp right next to it.”

“Obviously.”

“Cozy for reading.”

They abruptly stopped their laughter when the door opened again, and they lifted their heads to watch the general walk back in.

“And where were you two going?” Stepanov mocked, Russian accent thick in his voice.

“To the land of the free,” Steve blurted, shaking in his attempt to keep himself from laughing too much.

“Home of the brave,” Billy finished with a snort, and then the two of them couldn’t stop the slightly hysterical giggling at their terrible pun.

The soldiers that Stepanov had brought back with him went to pick the two of them up, righting their chairs once more, and they both had to swallow as the seriousness of their situation set in once again, and they were reminded that for now, there wasn’t much they could do to get out of this sticky situation.

The general rounded to face Billy again, bending slightly at the waist so that he was low enough to be not quite eye-to-eye with the teenager.

“Try telling the truth this time, yes?” he said condescendingly. “It will make your visit with Doctor Zharkov less painful.” In response, Billy screwed up his face, and spat a glob of blood mixed with his saliva at the Russian, where it landed on his cheek just below his eye.

“Fuck yourself,” he said succinctly.

“Jesus, Bill,” Steve sighed quietly to himself. Of course Billy would have to further piss off the man in charge.

But Stepanov only took a breath, reaching up calmly with a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe the mess from his face as he straightened up again.

“Begin with the pretty one,” he told the doctor, who had turned around with a bottle of something blue in his hands.

At first, Steve thought that the general must have been talking about Billy, because Billy was the prettiest person he knew, definitely, but then he saw the doctor approaching him with a large needle outstretched, and he kind of panicked because he’d never liked needles, really.

He sent a mental prayer out into the ether, to whoever was listening, that their friends could get help soon.

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“Shit, shit, shit, I would *kill* to only have to be dealing with the Russians right now,” Steve babbled, grabbing Billy’s shirt to yank him toward the Byers’ station wagon, stumbling himself as they fell out of the ‘Toddfather’.

The Frankenstein-ish monster’s screech drowned out what Billy had to say in response to that, but it didn’t matter as they pulled the door closed behind them and the car screeched away.

“Neil,” Billy was finally able to say when they began driving, the monster stomping along behind them to try and catch up.

Steve swung his gaze around to look at his boyfriend. “*What?* What about him?”

“That was Neil’s truck we just plowed into,” Billy panted, blinking and looking unsettled. “The Mind Flayer has got him now.”

“Fuck,” Steve blurted, the ramifications of Billy’s statement setting in. “Max is still at the mall – she’ll be around him...”

“Max can deal with Neil,” Billy interrupted, decision settling over his features. “We’ve got this thing distracted – that’s the best we can do.”

“How on earth are we going to beat this thing with it taking over your dad?” Steve wondered aloud.

“I don’t give a fuck what happens to Neil,” Billy decided. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll die with everyone else.”

“Hear, hear,” Robin muttered under her breath from the seat just in front of them.

*“Dusty-bun, do you copy?”*

They looked down at the walkie talkie on the ground, as an unfamiliar girl’s voice sounded in the small area in the car, followed by Dustin’s response, and they were drawn back to the matter at hand.

“We are going to give him so much shit for this,” Billy decided moments later as the last of the kids’ singing tapered off.

“Definitely,” Steve agreed.

“Uh...it’s turning around,” Robin called out nervously, looking out the back window.

“*What?*” Nancy demanded, spinning around in her chair to look for herself.

“It’s turning around!” Billy was the one to repeat.

“Maybe we wore it out!” Lucas said hopefully.

“I don’t think so,” Jonathan disagreed. “Hold on...” He spun the wheel around, pulling a quick U-turn back in the direction of the mall.

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Billy felt sickness rising in his throat when he looked over the atrium in the mall from the second floor, and saw Neil standing beside El, who was splayed out on the ground with the Mind Flayer leaning over them. Without a second’s thought, he lit up the firework that Steve shoved at him, throwing it with perfect precision at the monster.

“Flay this, you ugly piece of shit!” Lucas yelled down, throwing his own firework right after, where it landed right in the thing’s mouth as it opened it to screech at the younger boy.

In quick succession, the rest of them threw the fireworks they had at the monster, hoping to delay its destruction and feeding even if they couldn’t actually destroy it like this. Billy’s eyes darted around, taking everyone in and seeing that two people were unaccounted for who were supposed to be there.

“Where’s Max?!” Billy yelled, looking around at the rest of them, dread sitting in his gut as he looked back and forth around the mall and at the monster made up of the bodies of the people of Hawkins. “Where’s Max and Mike?”

There was no answer forthcoming, and Billy looked down at Neil, who was wincing and jerking in a mirror of the monster’s injuries,

but was still able to see El scrambling to get away, and ran over to drag her back by her foot.

At that, Billy shoved his basket of fireworks in Steve and Robin's direction, before running and sliding down the escalators to the main floor.

He reached his possessed father just as the older man grabbed El by the shoulders, slamming her against the ground in a move Billy had seen so many times – though he was usually the one on the other end of the violent movement.

He ran at Neil in a full tackle, throwing him off of El and toward the stairs letting down into the atrium.

"Where is Max, you fucker?!" Billy screamed in the man's face that was riddled with blackened veins. Given that he hadn't seen her since they'd peeled away from the mall to try and lead the Mind Flayer away from them, he wanted any hint possible that would tell him that she and Mike hadn't indeed been taken in by the monster like the rest of the victims had.

Neil's face was full of a hate that was his own and yet not, at the same time. The hate was familiar, but still there didn't seem to be anything left of Neil himself in the monster.

"You will *all* be ours," the monster's voice growled through Neil's mouth.

Billy was just quick enough to dodge Neil's hand as it shot out to grab him, and he responded with a kick that sent the older man falling back against the ground.

"Get out of here!" Billy yelled to El, who was staring helplessly up at the monster still shuddering under the deluge of fireworks, clearly wondering how she could stop the thing this time.

But his distraction cost him, as Neil moved with a speed that was abnormal even to him, plowing into him from the back and moving to restrain him against the ground. Billy struck out, fingernails scraping a gash into his face, just under his eye socket. Neil was

unfazed by this though, and landed a hard blow to Billy's already concussed head, leaving him dizzy, vision swimming around him.

Neil grabbed El by the wrist this time as she ran away, uncaring that he jerked her so hard that she fell off her feet, continuing to drag her to the monster as she thrashed and screamed. Another strike to her head and she went quiet, not unconscious but definitely dazed.

Abruptly the fireworks above them stopped, and Billy felt dread sink further in his gut as he realized that they must have run out. What the hell was keeping the four in the basement underneath them from closing the gate already? He hoped that that Russian – Alexei, he thought his name was – hadn't turned on them and made things sticky down there.

He struggled to his feet once again, swaying as he tried to regain his balance. He was suddenly weirdly grateful that he'd had so much experience pushing through head injuries in the past, because otherwise it may have been impossible for him to do anything right then.

He thought he must have been hit a little too hard this time though, because when he looked up he thought he saw Max and Mike running out from one of the stores, her shock of bright red hair visible even through blurred vision.

No matter, though. As he turned to see Neil standing beside El's prone form, in clear offering for the Mind Flayer stepping menacingly toward them, he realized suddenly that nothing else mattered, because they were out of time. There were no more fireworks, they had no more backup or stalling tactics, and the monster was going to feed on someone.

It was an easy choice to make, to shove Neil to get him out of the way, so that he couldn't stop him from protecting El once again. He wasn't going to let anything happen to this sister or any of the rest of his family.

The limb shot out, and Billy had enough time to see the claw-like teeth at the end of it before he launched himself forward to grab it before it could reach El.

It was incredibly difficult, the strength it took to keep the disgusting thing back. But he thought of his family in danger from this thing, terrorizing them for so long, and was determined to keep it back as long as he could. He distantly noted several things piercing sharply into his side at once, warmth escaping immediately, but he held on.

“*Billy!*” Max shrieked behind him.

And then, the resistance against him disappeared, and the monster fell back, ripping itself away from him. He fell back to the ground, landing hard on his ass as he looked at the thing screeching in protest as it knocked around into the beams and railing. Finally, it crashed to the ground, going limp with a final protesting croak.

Moments later, Max was beside him, El right behind her, both with eyes wide in horror.

“*Billy, Billy,*” Max babbled, hands hovering over the bleeding wound in his side, stark against the white wife beater that had truly been beat to hell in the last several hours.

“I’m fine, I’m *fine*,” Billy insisted, batting her hands away. But then Steve was there, yanking his shirt up to reveal the mangled wound.

“You *fucking idiot*,” Steve hissed angrily, but his eyes were worried and his hands were gentle as he pressed against the wound. “Next time you feel like doing something that stupid I’ll save you the trouble and kill you myself.”

“’Tis but a scratch,” Billy said blithely. “A flesh wound.”

“You – *fucking...*” Steve’s face twisted, and then he leaned over and abruptly pressed a hard kiss to Billy’s lips, which definitely hurt them both because those Russians hadn’t exactly been gentle earlier, but they didn’t really care because they were both alive, at least.

“That’s gross,” Dustin’s voice said, and they both looked up at him with identical looks on their faces, expecting him to have been giving them grief over the kissing, but instead he was looking down into the atrium, at a half-gelatinous body in front of the fallen Mind Flayer. It looked like Neil’s body had begun to be absorbed into the thing

before it had stopped halfway through, leaving him looking like some kind of horror movie zombie.

“He looks better this way,” Max decided. Her hand was still clenched around one of Billy’s wrists, assuring herself that he was alive and mostly okay.

“The Mind Flayer couldn’t tell the difference between his bodies anymore,” El offered, looking at the dead body. “Bad Papa had too much hate to be able to survive the hive’s death.”

“The Mind Flayer thought that it was another part of him?” Mike asked. “Like the demodogs?”

El nodded. “Like the demodogs,” she echoed in agreement.

“Well, thank fuck we don’t have to clean up *that* mess,” Billy finally said as the quiet drew out.

“No, we just have to clean up your *blood* fucking spilling all over the floor,” Steve snarked.

“Oh shit, do you think they’ll be able to get this out of the grout?” Billy said sarcastically. “I don’t want the people who own the mall to get mad at me.”

“Don’t play fucking coy, Hargrove,” Steve ordered. “I’m more concerned about it on the *outside* of your skin, where it’s *not* supposed to be.”

“I found a medical kit,” Robin volunteered, walking back up to them. They hadn’t even noticed her leaving. “We should probably get out of here before the whole mall burns down, though.”

“C’mon, get your ass up,” Steve said to Billy, leaving no room for argument. “Stop playing victim here.”

“I am a goddamn *cripple*,” Billy said melodramatically, not budging an inch to get up. “You should feel sorry for me here.”

“I’m not going to feel sorry for you if we have to take you to the burn unit because you won’t get your stubborn ass off the ground.”

“You’re calling *me* stubborn?!”

Max shared a commiserating look with El as the two boys continued to bicker, even as Steve helped Billy to his feet, supporting him as they walked toward the exit.

“Why are they saying that stuff to each other?” El wondered, slinging one arm around Mike’s shoulders and one around Max’s as she limped along with the rest of them.

“It’s their version of flirting,” Max sighed, eyes catching the gentle way Steve held Billy’s hand, other around his waist to keep him steady. “*Boys.*”

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Billy sat beside Steve at the back of the ambulance. He had been bandaged up and refused any kind of drugs or further treatment from the government people who had swarmed in. This was mostly due to the fact that they wanted to take him away immediately, and he couldn’t escape the feeling that he needed to watch the rest of his family, at least until the ones from the basement had appeared again and taken charge of the younger ones.

Steve sat beside him, a shock blanket wrapped around his shoulders as he stared out at the people running around. They were quiet, no words needing to be shared now as they watched the Wheelers appear, finding their children immediately. Max had gone with El a moment before to see if they could track down Joyce and Hopper, and Lucas and Erica had already been taken aside by their own parents. Robin was talking with Dustin, and Jonathan and Nancy stood close to Will, where the younger boy sat in the back of another ambulance.

Sudden movement caused Billy to tense, before his eyes focused on what he was seeing, and he relaxed at the sight of Joyce wrapping her youngest son in a big bear hug. Behind them was El gripping Hopper like she had no intention of ever letting go. Vaguely, Billy wondered where Murray and that blond Russian had gone – but considering the paranoia of one and the probable illegal status of the other, he figured it wasn’t too strange that they had beaten it as soon

as they were able.

“Max!”

Billy’s head snapped around at the familiar voice, seeing Susan running from her little sedan almost before she’d put it into park. Max looked startled at the ferocity of the hug she received, and then even more by Susan’s next demand of, “Are you alright? Is your brother okay? Where is Billy?”

“What the hell,” Billy said to Steve, who looked just as surprised and confused beside him as they watched the interaction.

“The world really has turned upside down,” Steve snorted a little at his own joke.

Billy shoved him slightly. “That was awful,” he said, but he was laughing himself, high on the relief that everyone was alright. He rose to his feet. “C’mon. Let’s go see what Susan wants.”

“You can face an interdimensional monster on your own, but not your stepmother?” Steve teased with a snort, even as he followed along beside Billy.

“No way,” Billy played along dramatically, shaking his head solemnly. “I need backup here, Stevie.”

Steve smiled and squeezed Billy’s arm briefly enough not to be noted by anyone who might see. “Alright,” he said, “I’ve got your back. I’ll follow you anywhere.”

### **Author's Note:**

Damn, Susan. Taking up half the story like that...

It does serve a purpose, though. We will see more of that in the next installment.

There's ONLY ONE LEFT!! I'm so excited I can taste it. This has been the longest story I've ever kept going, and I'm so glad to almost be done with it! Let me know what you thought!